

Remaking sprawling metropolises

'It's about creating a city that works for everyone who lives in it'

MICHAEL MORRIS

PLACING people at the centre of urban design must be the core objective of overcoming apartheid spatial planning, says architect, urban designer and former city planner Barbara Southworth.

As images of abandonment, it is true – as the website www.failedarchitecture.com promises – that “there is nothing creepier and more fascinating”.

It is as if something awful has happened – a deadly contamination, perhaps – to sponsor flight so thorough.

The truth, in fact, is almost disarmingly mundane: the creepy, fascinating images are of abandoned shopping malls across America, which, without teeming shoppers and their acres of parking glittering with cars, seem deadly.

In the vast, dusty silence of these unlovely hulks, the cracked and warped veneers – “marbled” columns, “classical” facades – seem to confirm the impermanence, the triviality, of the illusion, and the inevitability of its decomposition.

On the face of it, the “Completely Surreal Photos Of America's Abandoned Malls” on www.failedarchitecture.com have little bearing on the primary challenge facing Cape Town and other South African cities: the imperative – as everyone in the debate now asserts – of undoing the effects of “apartheid spatial planning”.

Yet, as Southworth argues, there is a telling confluence.

If creating inhuman – or dehumanising – spaces was,



The aerial photographs indicate the scope for development on school campuses. Building housing on the edges of school sites, as illustrated in these graphics, would meet housing demand and help secure schools.

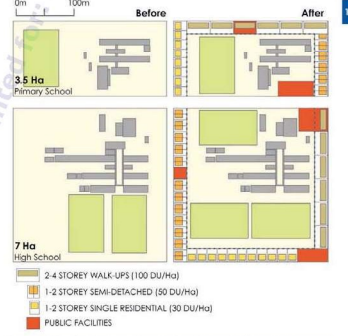


Figure 106. Indicative layout for schools and the potential for infill

Figure 105. Existing school within study region exhibiting poor spatial formation

Table 32. Indicative Housing Infill per school type

SCHOOL TYPE	TOTAL AREA (HA)	AREA FOR DEVELOPMENT (HA)	TOTAL HOUSING UNITS	2-4 STOREY WALK-UPS (100 DU/HA)	1-2 STOREY SEMI-DETACHED (50 DU/HA)	1-2 STOREY SINGLE RESIDENTIAL (30 DU/HA)
Primary School	3.5	1	64	48	8	8
High School	7	1 665	98	48	36	14

Table 33. Indicative Housing Infill for schools within the study region

MUNICIPALITIES	# PRIMARY SCHOOLS	# HIGH SCHOOLS	POTENTIAL # DU ON PRIMARY SCHOOLS	POTENTIAL # DU ON HIGH SCHOOLS
Breede Valley	415	181	26 560	11 584
City of Cape Town	30	24	1 920	1 536
Dorchester	39	19	2 496	1 216
Swartland	21	7	1 344	448
Stellenbosch	21	10	1 344	640
Saldanha	12	10	768	640
Ovenstrand	4	5	288	320
Theewaterskloof	15	13	960	832
Sub-TOTAL	559	269	35 776	17 216
TOTAL	878	450	52 992	

GCM 2017 / Status Quo Baseline Study / First Draft

by apportioning urban benefits or penalties by race, the intention of apartheid planners, it was also an unintended consequence of a far-reaching

20th century technology: the motor car.

By the time apartheid was in full swing, so were planning conventions that stimulated

sprawl, suburban habits and ever-expanding road networks.

These, in turn, brought growing costs, fragmented cities, social alienation and –

for those who couldn't buy a nice house near enough to a freeway (perhaps having been forced out of it by the Group Areas Act) or a dependable car to go the growing distances to work and shops and school and back – a dispiriting city life of continuing poverty, scant opportunity and fading hope.

If the failure of sprawling cities in the US is vividly illustrated by those abandoned malls, the combination of late 20th century planning and the racial ordering of our cities by apartheid legislation has left us with divided, inequitable urban centres, discomforting levels of resentment or indifference and staggering material, social and personal costs, exacted indiscriminately.

Yet, as Southworth points out, as cities were made, they can be remade.

The objective, every bit as valid for the US as for South Africa, is putting people back into planning.

The benefits – like the costs of not doing so – are universal.

What suits people best is also “what is robust”, she argues.

That includes local economic development in an environment that encourages small businesses and enables people to live near jobs and opportunities.

“This is the reason why the centre of Barcelona, or Manhattan, survived the massive economic ups and downs of recent years – but the really classic example is Portland, Oregon, which, 20 years ago, was the outlier among all American cities in deciding it would not accept any lateral expansion (sprawl), and pushed densification and management of public space.

“It was counter to what everyone else was doing. And when the property crash came, Portland, like other places with viable CBDs, was almost unaffected.”

“People could sell their cars, for instance, and still get to work.

“But people in the suburbs had to curry on making car and house payments... and if they wanted to keep their job, they had to keep their car and foreclose on their home.

The collapse was driven by the car-dependent suburban model.”

Those creepy, moribund malls were a symbol of the failure.

Actively reversing sprawl stands to generate considerable cost savings in running the city, Southworth points out.

“Consider what the city and the provincial government would save (in transport and infrastructure costs, among others) if 20 000 people who currently travel from the outskirts to the city every day could live in the CBD.”

Higher inner-city residential densities would make public transport initiatives such as MyCiti more viable – and provide fares travelling in both directions, not merely into the city in the morning and out in the evening.

It would also lift the “thresholds of support for commercial and retail activity”.

The city would be “safer, more viable and sustainable to live in, and more affordable to residents.

Transport savings would release a lot of disposable income for families to use on education or other things.”

“It's worth noting that even young graduates such as lawyers and architects who work in practices in the CBD cannot afford to live there.

“If they want to own property, they have to live miles out, and if one truck turns over on the N2, half the workforce arrives late for work.

“For business, and for everybody else, the sprawling city is a cost.”

Stimulating local economic development, and creating denser, more resilient, economically and socially integrated cities is, in fact, the gist of a range of policies and planning initiatives in all three levels of government in South Africa.

Cape Town's focus on two major corridors – the Voortrekker Road Corridor between Bellville and the city centre, and the South East Corridor between Khayelitsha and the central city – are examples of this.

“But,” Southworth says, “and it's a big ‘but’, what it takes is strong leadership and an ability to connect costs across departments.”

The term – now being used in city provincial and national treasury policy documents – is “transversal” design, funding or management intended to overcome the “silo” effect of departments functioning on their own.

Mayor Patricia de Lille used the term this week at the first full council meeting of the year. It is central to thinking in the province, too.

Southworth is well-placed to assess the scope for new ways of doing things: the former director of Spatial Planning & Urban

Design in the city until 2007 has, since joining architecture and urban design practice GAPP, been extensively engaged in public sector projects (reviewing metro plans and preparing design guides for catalytic urban precinct hubs in townships for the national Treasury), and working on spatial development frameworks for the Western Cape, with a focus on the greater Cape Town region.

This work has produced a telling illustration of the potential of “transversal” thinking in simultaneously tackling the housing shortage and the cost



A Bambaani worker surveys a classroom at Uitsig High School, which has been vandalised again. A quarter of the education maintenance budget goes on repairs relating to vandalism. PICTURE: CINDY WAXA.



An abandoned mall in the US. PICTURE: SUPPLIED



Barbara Southworth, the director of GAPP Architects/urban designers/spatial planners, at her office in Longmarket Street. PICTURE: BHEKI RADEBE

of school vandalism. It wells from Southworth's work on schools asset maintenance for the Western Cape Transport and Public Works Department.

Drawing on the data base of provincial schools in the greater Cape Town region, incorporating neighbouring municipalities from the Swartland to Grabouw, it emerged that a quarter of the education maintenance budget goes on repairs relating to vandalism.

Schools were vulnerable, Southworth found, partly because of the way they were designed: isolated on large campuses, fenced and difficult to secure.

Instead of relying on increased, costly security measures, Southworth suggested something entirely different.

“If you developed two sides of every school, using a mix of single, double and four-storey walk-ups, you wouldn't need fencing and more security – and you would generate 56 000 housing units (on 828 schools) without having to build a kilometre of road, any bulk service

lines, and without a single new large ‘greenfield’ development on periphery.

“Schools will no longer have a security risk, vandalism costs will fall, and you create better, safer places for children and people in the community, and ideal accommodation for teachers.

“It's a demonstration of how, if departments work together, what seemed to be two insoluble problems can be solved simultaneously.”

Southworth adds: “It's not a foregone conclusion that in order to develop, Cape Town needs to grow in extent. I would argue that in order to develop, Cape Town needs not to spread.

“Taking the school example, to another level, if you start to co-locate things – to cluster public facilities – you make everything more viable and convenient.

“So if you have two children and one is sick, you can take one to the clinic, the other to school, and still get to work and earn some income.

“It's about creating a city that works for everyone.”

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